

1. The Tent

by Carla Zaccagnini

"What color was the tent we traveled with to the south?" I asked. "It was an army tent," he replied. *Green*, I thought, *olive-green*. Or *army-green*. The next question would have been, "How did a military tent end up in our possession, in 1977?" I didn't ask.

I imagine it might have belonged to his brother Jorge, my uncle. Jorge died young, of cirrhosis, and the memories I have of him are few and discolored, yet vigorous. I remember seeing him spinning around an imaginary axis starting at the top of his head and ending between his two feet, in order to roll up the belt of the impeccable gaucho trousers that he used to wear in the farm. I remember following the delicate and precise movements of his hands for days on end, when he was building an extremely complex kite in the shape of a bird—an eagle, I think—while my maternal grandfather, following instructions from the same book and using materials that the main project discarded, made a pink star with my name on it. *Carla*, in leaf-green. It remained behind a bed in the farm for years—the star, not the eagle. The eagle had a short life. It couldn't gain height on the first attempt or on the second, and there wasn't a third one. Jorge walked firmly towards where it landed and trampled on it until there was nothing that could be recognized in the remaining mixture of bird, earth, and grass.

Jorge used to collect weapons and practiced shooting; I think he once hurt his own knee when trying to hit a can. I think I remember when he invited some friends in uniform to the farm. Army-green. I remember seeing him break the blade of a carving knife in half, with his bare hands; it happened during a fight with my grandmother that I followed from a stool in the kitchen. My cousin remembers another fight—or, maybe it was the same fight as seen from another angle and stored by another memory—in which our uncle drove a knife through the pullover our grandmother was wearing. Every time I was alone with her, my grandmother would want to tell me about her youngest son. "I remember," my grandmother would say again and again, "the last time I saw Jorge entering through that door." And she would point at the door of the dining room in the house where she lived, where we had lived before her. I remember the night when my father woke me, telling me that Jorge had died. My mother was away, and he cried alone.

Shortly after, we found out that he used to write poetry.



We traveled south with a tent. The idea was to go as far as Ushuaia. My father drove a Renault 6—light green—with a hole where my mother could otherwise have rested her feet. I sat in the back—surrounded by luggage, I imagine. Not only the pieces we brought with us from Buenos Aires but also those we must have kept accumulating along the way. Among other things, we had a 20-liter canister filled with gasoline. I still know how it smelled and the sound it made each time the liquid hit the plastic, like a delayed reflex after every curve or bump. It proved useful the day we got lost driving on the Patagonian Meseta towards the Road of the Seven Lakes. Everything around us was flat, and we didn't pass a single soul. Only by nightfall when he climbed onto the car's roof, did my father see one light on the horizon. We drove towards it. It was a house by a lake. Its single inhabitant took fuel from his own boat to feed our car and showed us the way.

I heard this for the first time the other day, when I asked about the color of the tent, the model of the car, and the trajectory of our trip. What I always get to hear about this trip is the anecdote that supposedly proves how I, already at age four, wasn't made for camping.

It is said that I fell ill and was taken to a doctor in the first village that emerged on our way. It was called Tres Plumas (Three Feathers) or possibly Tres Chapas (Three Locks). The waiting room was lugubrious—I think this is where I learned the word, or maybe it was when we were already back and tried to describe where we had been. The illustration of lugubrious will always be the waiting room of a village doctor who doesn't like the sunlight. My father wanted to draw the curtains, but the receptionist refused. "The doctor doesn't like this," she said. We left. In the next village, one called Tres Chapas (Three Locks) or most likely Tres Plumas (Three Feathers), we met a pediatrician who didn't shun natural light.

After examining me, she concluded that all I needed was to spend a few days in the same place. It is told (insistently so) that when we entered the hotel room at the Automobile Club in Trelew, I jumped on the mattress shouting: "A bed! A bed!" "A bed," my father invariably repeats it in a high-pitched voice.



I always thought this was the reason why they had decided to sell the tent (which, until recently, I imagined to be red and blue). But it turned out to be different; the army tent was kept in the family. Until some years ago Jorge still had it. This is my other uncle Jorge, my mother's brother—the mountain climber—who now lives in La Cumbre (The Summit).

This story, however, shouldn't be about the tent that somehow ended up connecting my two uncles with the same name, who have always been like two opposite sides of a mirror. This story shouldn't be about my relationship to camping and hotels. Neither should it be about flying kites or driving south. This story is about the selling of a tent, which I initially thought was this one, but was actually another. The tent for sale belonged to the Bergeret family. My friend and schoolmate Magdalena's father, Bernardo, had asked my father to sell it —because "Guillermo was an expert". Their tent had hardly been used. Maybe the Bergeret kids also preferred hotel rooms. None of this I remember, in fact, I rebuilt the story from scattered pieces of badly kept information: the collateral clues I got when asking about the color of the first tent and those I gathered in a few other triangulated messages. This second tent

doesn't have a color. I don't think I ever saw it opened. Magdalena said, "It could have been cream," though it could also have been red and blue.

Guillermo placed an announcement in a weekly paper called *Segunda Mano*, which, if I am not mistaken, used to be published on Mondays (or Tuesdays). Years later, the same Bernardo took a copy of this paper with him on one of his frequent business trips to Rio. He threw it on a friend's desk and said, "Look, I brought you an idea." The friend, or one of this friend's friends, then started publishing the equivalent in Brazil—it was called *Primeira Mão* and was issued on Tuesdays (or Mondays). The title of the Brazilian version was a euphemism, as both publications were dedicated to announcing secondhand objects for sale.

A man, who, at that time, I would have described as big, came to see it. He had one hand in plaster and a briefcase in the other. A hard-shell attaché with a code, like the ones used by businessmen and spies back then. He also brought a nephew with him. He liked the tent (it's possible that we saw it open after all). He gave her a closed envelope. I followed the conversation from a distance—interested but wanting to pass unnoticed.



I remember seeing my mother taking the bills out of the envelope and counting them at the kitchen table. Her expression was that of someone wanting to appear as having done this before, as if this time wasn't more than once more. I can still picture her polished nails, her attentive eyes, her lips moving fast but little, letting a flow of thin air escape, sounding more like wind than like numbers. I can still hear each note evoking a partial result instead of its own name; each bill added to all the previous ones and waiting for the next to come, like a link in a chain. I still sense the sound of the paper raising and stretching, detaching itself and then leaning against the bundle again. She counted without unfolding them, without unmaking the wad of bills, without shuffling the color order. Just like the way in which each different

layer in a cake has its own taste and texture, so also does each layer of color in a well-built stack of bills have its own density and sweetness. *Tsssfts tssscfst trssstsfss trssstvtcs*, and, finally, the sound of the agreed sum. Then the money disappeared back in the envelope.

“Very well, thank you, I will show you to the door.” The man took the briefcase from the kitchen table with his healthy hand. The nephew took the tent.

I think I also followed them to the door. And when we came back my mother opened the envelope, held the wad and noticed that it wasn't the same anymore. The man who then seemed big had taken the bills that had been caressed by my mother's fingers and named by the wind coming from her lips. As in a magic trick, a sleight of hand, he had transformed those notes into others, into a stack with only one real bill: the one on the outside. The filling was made of white papers, carefully cut into the size of banknotes. They were folded with less precision than when separated by color, and embraced by an identical rubber band—a cake made of nothing but flour.

My mother ran to the door, unlocked it, opened it, and looked at both sides of the street. They were nowhere to be found. Gone. Gone the man who probably wasn't that big after all; gone the briefcase that may have had a false bottom; gone the arm that may have been healthy and strong; gone the young man who instead of a nephew may have been an associate (or a lover). Gone the tent, which may not have had the colors of the French flag. Gone the money with its volume and smell.

English version edited by Sarah Demeuse.

